Historical Papers
Communications historiques

The Misery of Victory: France's Struggle for the Versailles Treaty

Sally Marks

Volume 21, numéro 1, 1986

Winnipeg 1986

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/030949ar
DOI : https://doi.org/10.7202/030949ar

Aller au sommaire du numéro

Éditeur(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0068-8878 (imprimé)
1712-9109 (numérique)

Découvrir la revue

Citer cet article

Marks, S. (1986). The Misery of Victory: France's Struggle for the Versailles Treaty. *Historical Papers / Communications historiques*, *21*(1), 117–133. https://doi.org/10.7202/030949ar

Résumé de l'article

De 1920 jusqu'à nos jours, la politique française d'après Versailles a été jugée déraisonnable. Mais l'était-elle vraiment? La Grande-Bretagne et les États-Unis le croyaient et estimaient qu'il aurait été plus simple que la France accepte la défaite suite à la libération. Ils croyaient faussement que l'Allemagne voulait oublier le passé, comme ils l'avaient fait eux mêmes, et ils ont mal interprété l'équilibre du pouvoir, exagérant la prosternation temporaire de l'Allemagne et l'ascendance passagère de la France. Donc ils craignaient le prédominance française.

La France s'inquiétait pour sa survie. Elle chercha à prévenir le retour de la prédominance allemande. La France était réaliste quant aux faits, même si elle ne l'était pas toujours face à ses alliés d'autrefois. Elle manquait parfois de tact et était souvent désorganisée; elle manqua de courage, de volonté, de propagande et de perspicacité économique. Elle savait, néanmoins, qu'elle n'avait pas gagné la guerre et qu'elle ne pouvait pas imposer la paix seule contre l'Allemagne presque intacte et dont la position de pouvoir avait été accrue par la fragmentation de l'Europe.

Elle réalisait que des alliances avec plusieurs petits pays ne pouvaient compenser pour le lien avec la Russie, que l'Allemagne était plus forte et que les clauses du traité qui compensaient ce fait étaient temporaires pour la plupart. Ainsi la France comptait sur la Grande-Bretagne et les États-Unis pour sa sécurité parce que sans eux elle était perdue, elle refusait d'admettre les preuves toujours plus grandes de leur neutralité ou pire, de leur sympathie pour l'Allemagne.

L'Allemagne et la France ont toutes deux misé sur la Grande-Bretagne dans leurs efforts respectifs de défaire ou de préserver le Traité de Versailles. L'Allemagne eut la tâche plus facile puisque la Grande-Bretagne eut tôt fait, elle aussi, de chercher à circonvenir au Traité. Préoccupée par des problèmes impériaux et économiques, la Grande-Bretagne craignait la concurrence du marché allemand pour financer les réparations et aussi la puissance militaire française qui s'effritait; elle était hostile à son adversaire historique et impatients d'être de nouveau au centre de l'équilibre du pouvoir. Désormais, secondée fortement par les États-Unis, elle essaya de renforcer l'Allemagne au dépens de la France, ce qui explique largement pourquoi la France progressa péniblement en cinq ans de sa détermination à faire respecter les principales clauses du Traité jusqu'à sa resignation à la défaite.

Les principaux instruments pour « la poursuite de la guerre par d'autre moyens » étaient les réparations et le désarmement. Le conflit de la Ruhr fut le point culminant de la première bataille et le plan Dawes incarna la défaite de la France. Par la signature de Pacte de Locarno on cessait d'exiger que l'Allemagne se désarme et on consacrait son retour à l'égalité et à la respectabilité diplomatique. Par après, une France abattue construisit la ligne Maginot, tenta sans grand succès de récupérer un peu par le Plan Young et s'accrocha vainement, comme lors de la tentative de Briand de geler le statu quo en proposant son « Union Européenne ».

L'échec de la France résulta en partie de ses propres erreurs, mais surtout de la défection anglo-américaine. Parce qu'il était politiquement inconcevable qu'elle admette la défaite ou qu'elle s'allie à la Russie soviétique, elle continua de lutter en vain, tentant de ne pas reconnaître les faits. Et pourtant par sa décision dès le départ d'accepter une armistice très modérée et qui d'ailleurs n'en était pas une vraiment, par cette décision donc, la France a peut-être contribué à sa propre déclin, ne récoltant que la misère plutôt que la grandeur de la victoire.

The Misery of Victory: France's Struggle for the Versailles Treaty

SALLY MARKS

Résumé

From 1920 to this day, French policy after Versailles has been termed unreasonable, but was it really? Britain and the United States thought so, and effectively deemed it simplest if France would accept defeat in the aftermath of deliverance. They mistakenly thought Germany wanted to forget the past, as they did, and they misread the power balance, exaggerating Germany's temporary prostration and France's fleeting ascendancy. Thus they feared French predominance.

France worried about survival. She acted consistently to prevent a return of German predominance. France was realistic about the facts, if not always about her erstwhile allies. She was sometimes tactless and often disorganized; she clearly had failures of courage, will, propaganda, and economic insights. She knew, however, that she had not won the war and could not impose the peace alone against a largely intact Germany whose power position had been enhanced by the fragmentation of Europe. She saw that small-power alliances could not compensate for the Russian tie, that Germany was stronger, and that treaty clauses to offset that fact were mostly temporary. Thus France relied on Britain and the United States for security because without them she was lost, refusing to face mounting evidence that they were at best neutral, at worst in Germany's camp.

Germany and France both concentrated on Britain in their efforts respectively to undo or preserve the Versailles treaty. Germany had the easier task, as Britain soon wanted to circumvent the treaty too. Preoccupied with imperial and economic problems, Britain feared German market competition to finance reparations and also France's dwindling military power; she was hostile to her historic foe and eager to be the fulcrum of the power balance again. Hence, seconded substantially by the United States, she tried to strengthen Germany at French expense — a state of affairs which largely explains why France painfully progressed in five years from a determination to enforce key treaty clauses to defeated resignation.

The chief battlegrounds of "the continuation of war by other means" were reparations and disarmament. The Ruhr conflict was the climax of the first battle, and the Dawes Plan embodied France's defeat. Locarno signalled both abandonment of requiring Germany's disarmament and her return to equality and diplomatic respectability. Thereafter a defeated France built the Maginot Line, tried with scant success to salvage something in the Young Plan, and clutched at straws, as in Briand's attempt to freeze the political status quo in his "European Union" scheme.

France's failure stemmed partly from her own errors but primarily from Anglo-American defection. As admitting defeat or combining with Soviet Russia were politically unthinkable, she struggled on in vain, trying not to face facts. Yet her decision at the outset to accept a misnamed and fatefully moderate Armistice may have contributed to her eclipse, leaving France only the misery, not the grandeur, of victory.

★ ★ ★ ★

De 1920 jusqu'à nos jours, la politique française d'après Versailles a été jugée déraisonnable. Mais l'était-elle vraiment? La Grande-Bretagne et les États-Unis le croyaient et estimaient qu'il aurait été plus simple que la France accepte la défaite suite à la libération. Ils croyaient faussement que l'Allemagne voulait oublier le passé, comme ils l'avaient fait eux mêmes, et ils ont mal interprété l'équilibre du pouvoir, exagérant la prosternation temporaire de l'Allemagne et l'ascendance passagère de la France. Donc ils craignaient le prédominance française.

La France s'inquiétait pour sa survie. Elle chercha à prévenir le retour de la prédominance allemande. La France était réaliste quant aux faits, même si elle ne l'était pas toujours face à ses alliés d'autrefois. Elle manquait parfois de tact et était souvent désorganisée; elle manqua de courage, de volonté, de propagande et de perspicacité économique. Elle savait, néanmoins, qu'elle n'avait pas gagné la guerre et qu'elle ne pouvait pas imposer la paix seule contre l'Allemagne presque intacte et dont la position de pouvoir avait été accrue par la fragmentation de l'Europe.

Elle réalisait que des alliances avec plusieurs petits pays ne pouvaient compenser pour le lien avec la Russie, que l'Allemagne était plus forte et que les clauses du traîté qui compensaient ce fait étaient temporaires pour la plupart. Ainsi la France comptait sur la Grande-Bretagne et les États-Unis pour sa sécurité parce que sans eux elle était perdue, elle refusait d'admettre les preuves toujours plus grandes de leur neutralité ou pire, de leur sympathie pour l'Allemagne.

L'Allemagne et la France ont toutes deux misé sur la Grande-Bretagne dans leurs efforts respectifs de défaire ou de préserver le Traîté de Versailles. L'Allemagne eut la tâche plus facile puisque la Grande-Bretagne eut tôt fait, elle aussi, de chercher à circonvenir au Traîté. Préoccupée par des problèmes impériaux et économiques, la Grande-Bretagne craignait la concurrence du marché allemand pour financer les réparations et aussi la puissance militaire française qui s'effritait; elle était hostile à son adversaire historique et impatients d'être de nouveau au centre de l'equilibre du pouvoir. Désormais, secondée fortement par les États-Unis, elle essaya de renforcer l'Allemagne au dépens de la France, ce qui explique largement pourquoi la France progressa péniblement en cinq ans de sa détermination à faire respecter les principales clauses du Traîté jusqu'à sa resignation à la défaite.

Les principaux instruments pour "la poursuite de la guerre par d'autre moyens" étaient les réparations et le désarmement. Le conflit de la Ruhr fut le point

culminant de la première bataille et le plan Dawes incarna la défaite de la France. Par la signature de Pacte de Locarno on cessait d'exiger que l'Allemagne se désarme et on consacrait son retour à l'égalité et à la respectabilité diplomatique. Par après, une France abattue construisit la ligne Maginot, tenta sans grand succès de récupérer un peu par le Plan Young et s'accrocha vainement, comme lors de la tentative de Briand de geler le statu quo en proposant son "Union Européenne".

L'echèc de la France résulta en partie de ses propres erreurs, mais surtout de la défection anglo-américaine. Parce qu'il était politiquement inconcevable qu'elle admette la défaite ou qu'elle s'allie à la Russie soviétique, elle continua de lutter en vain, tentant de ne pas reconnaître les faits. Et pourtant par sa décision dès la départ d'accepter une armistice très modérée et qui d'ailleurs n'en était pas une vraiment, par cette décision donc, la France a peut-être contribué à sa propre déclin, ne récoltant que la misère plutôt que la grandeur de la victoire.

From 1920 until this day, French policy after Versailles has been much criticized. Why were the French deemed so unreasonable and aggressive? Were they in fact that, or were the Anglo-Saxons blinded by prejudice or dubious assumptions? Certainly the British and Germans won the immediate propaganda war and played more skilfully to the historical galleries. Their documents were available first and in a more accessible form. Beyond that, many British and American scholars, especially experts in American foreign policy, have dodged the challenge of archival work in Paris. In confining themselves to British and American — and occasionally German — documents, they have taken on the assumptions of those documents, which were often peculiar.

In a sense, the policy of British and American leaders amounted to a tacit, unanalyzed hope that if only France would accept defeat in the aftermath of deliverance, all would be well. In their mounting desire to put the past behind them, they assumed Germany wished to do the same, which it did not. Thus, they failed to see the implications of their policy. They also confused the short term with the long run, assuming temporary prostration of Germany would last as would France's fleeting ascendancy, and so they utterly misread the underlying power balance.[1] The French did not make this mistake. While others fretted about French predominance and unreasonableness in aiming at partial enforcement of key treaty clauses, France's leaders worried about survival. Their policy, consistent in goals if varying in tactics, was often disorganized, defensive, rigid, and irritating, occasionally unwise, but not aimed at dismemberment of Germany or domination of the continent. Its purpose was to prevent a return of German predominance, and it derived from fear.[2]

1. Thomas Jones, *Whitehall Diary* (London, 1969), 1:178; Italy, Ministero degli affari esteri, *I documenti diplomatici italiani*, settima serie (Rome, 1953–), 3:320.
2. For example, de Gaiffier to Hymans, 24 March 1924, no. 4075/1458, Belgium, Ministère des Affaires Etrangères, archive, Correspondance politique: France, file 1924 [hereafter BMAE CP FR/1924].

The consistency of French policy through such diverse leaders as Millerand, Poincaré, Herriot, and Briand stemmed from a clear appreciation of the material facts facing France after conclusion of the Versailles treaty, together with a less realistic view of the policies of her erstwhile allies and a certain relaxation of will. As to the last, France could have done more to repair her financial vulnerability and to face up to the implications of the five-year economic treaty clauses, which afforded only a temporary respite to offset the disorganization and dependence on Germany of the French coal, iron, and steel industries. To do so, however, would have meant severe political problems for precarious coalitions along with further hardships for war-weary voters. Besides, those who directed foreign policy in the early 1920s, when many key battles were lost, had little appreciation of the role of economic and financial factors in the power equation. Thus they tended to assume that things would work out somehow because they must.

From the outset, French leaders deemed the Versailles treaty barely adequate to the task of constraining Germany if it was enforced,[3] which in important respects it was not. They knew they had not won the war, that rescue had been close-run, and that they could not impose the peace alone. They understood that German power had not been destroyed, in fact had been relatively enhanced by the fragmentation of Europe. Sorely missing the Russian tie to counterbalance Germany, they tried to compensate partially by alliances with Germany's neighbours, equally fearful of latent German strength and will to dominance. In French eyes, Belgium and, to a lesser degree, Poland and Czechoslovakia were to be French instruments, regarded chiefly as assets, rarely as liabilities. The next war, whose advent they did not really doubt, was to be fought in Belgium, not France, and the eastern allies were to come to the rescue, not be rescued themselves, for French leaders concluded by 1925 that the Polish corridor was not sustainable.[4] They sensed that, given German attitudes, the peace lacked permanence, but their response, within limits, was to try to secure what was theirs by treaty right.

The French knew that Germany did not accept the treaty and was fundamentally the stronger power, that treaty clauses designed to compensate France for this basic fact tended to be temporary, and that small allies were no substitute for the Russian colossus, with which they did not contemplate alliance now that it was Bolshevist. Thus, in the postwar struggle which one German official accurately termed "the continuation of war by other means,"[5] France relied for security on the Western Allies, chiefly Britain and the United States. Here her expectations were reasonable but increasingly unrealistic as she ignored mounting

3. For example, Jacques Bardoux, *De Paris à Spa: La Bataille diplomatique pour la paix française, février 1919–octobre 1920* (Paris, 1921); also de Gaiffier to Hymans, 18 Feb. 1920, no. 1946/1031, BMAE CP FR/1920/I.

4. De Gaiffier to Hymans, 18 March and 27 Apr. 1925, nos. 3368/1582, 4950/2315, BMAE CP FR/1925.

5. Quotation from Weimarer Republik, Akten der Reickskanzlei, *Das Kabinett Cuno* (Boppard am Rhein, 1968), 192. For French views, see France, Ministère des Affaires Etrangères, archive [hereafter FMAE], note 25 May 1920, série A, file 92; de Gaiffier to Jaspar, 8 Feb. 1921, no. 1224/604, BMAE CP FR/1921.

evidence that the alliances had changed. French leaders shared British contempt for Italy and recognized her fickleness;[6] they were brutal in treating Belgium as a satellite,[7] but they could not accept increasingly clear indications that Britain and the US were no longer at France's side. They had to be there, especially Britain, because without them France was lost; hence French leaders kept trying to convert what was not into reality, closing their eyes to the fact that the erstwhile allies were at best neutral, at worst in the enemy camp.

The key power in the diplomatic war was Britain. Germany saw at an early stage that undoing the Versailles treaty and the 1918 military verdict on which it rested depended upon splitting the Entente, and they understood where the soft spot was.[8] Equally, France knew that the British Empire, the Royal Navy, and British ties to Wall Street had brought deliverance in the war just past and were the best hope of salvation in the future. Thus both protagonists concentrated upon Britain but, as time passed, the Germans had the easier task. The British in general, and Lloyd George in particular, had many reservations about the treaty; with time, these grew along with an urge to revise it, invariably to Germany's benefit.[9] Britain was preoccupied with Empire and domestic problems; as always, she wished to withdraw from Europe and, especially in the aftermath of World War I, to avoid another bloodletting. She accepted dubious German arguments that reparations could only be paid by an export drive at British expense,[10] and, given her unemployment and battered trade balances, that argument took its toll, as did Keynes' clever but misleading imprecations. Britain aspired again to be the fulcrum in the power balance[11] but misread the basic equation. Thus she wrote Germany off for a generation, refusing to look beyond that, and was genuinely alarmed at the

6. R. Graham to Curzon, 8 Dec. 1922, tel. 398, FO 317/7660, Public Record Office, London [hereafter PRO]; Barrère (Lausanne) to Poincaré, 6 Dec. 1922, tel. 104, Charles-Roux to Poincaré, 4 and 6 Dec. 1922, tels. 1455–9, 1467–8, série Z [hereafter Z/], file 81.
7. Berthelot to Clemenceau, 25 Aug. 1919, Service Historique de l'Armée, Vincennes, file 6N/75 [hereafter Vin/6N/75].
8. Kerchove to Hymans, 28 Apr. 1920, no. 2410/896, BMAE CP FR/1920/I; de Gaiffier to Hymans, 24 July 1920, no. 7642/3978, BMAE CP FR/1920/II; de Gaiffier to Jaspar, 17 March 1920, no. 2619/1272, 18 May 1921, no. 4679/2252, BMAE CP FR/1921; Weimarer Republik, Akten der Reichskanzlei, *Die Kabinette Wirth I und II* (Boppard am Rhein, 1973), I:204n, 238.
9. Kenneth O. Morgan, *Consensus and Disunity: The Lloyd George Coalition Government, 1918–1922* (Oxford, 1979), 139–43; de Gaiffier to Jaspar, 26 Nov. 1920, no. 11574/5807, BMAE CP FR/1920/II; de Gaiffier to Jaspar, 18 May and 15 June 1921, nos. 5789/2824, 4679/2252, BMAE FR/1921. See also Lorna Jaffe, *The Decision to Disarm Germany* (Boston, 1985), 217–8.
10. David Lloyd George, *The Truth about Reparations and War Debts* (London, 1932), 15, 43–51, 83; Moncheur to Hymans, 4 March 1920, no. 1034/346, BMAE, série B, file 366/II [hereafter B/366/II]; Moncheur to Jaspar, 4 Feb. 1921, no. 5050/202, BMAE B/366/III; Report of Federation of British Industries on German Reparations, n.d. [late 1921], BMAE B/366/V.
11. Hankey memo, 31 Dec. 1920, papers of Baron Hankey, Churchill College, Cambridge, file 1/5; Jaffe, *Decision*, 217–8.

size of the French air force and rapidly shrinking army, and at the French submarine-building programme and plans to modernize her obsolete navy.[12] Always the British pressed for reduction of land armaments, but not naval ones — unless they were French.[13] Hostility to the historic foe soon reemerged in this and other ways, notably imperial and economic. Thus the French sought protection from a power which feared them and which urged France to make peace with Germany — on German terms.

The British wrapped their policy in rectitude, complete with elevated oratory about the only route to permanent peace, and soon convinced themselves and much of the western world that they had a monopoly on international morality. The Americans did the same with less skill — when they bothered at all. France was more realistic about American withdrawal than British but never abandoned hope of luring the United States back into Europe, especially in the late twenties. Clearly, some factors shaping British policy also applied to the United States, but not all. For reasons which Americanists have not fully explored, American policy, both governmental and that of the financiers, reinforced that of Britain.[14] Both powers tended to do what was easiest, standing aloof or on the middle ground or throwing their weight to the German side of the scales. It is little wonder that in five short years France progressed from determination to enforce much of the treaty to resignation and acceptance. It was to be a painful progression.

At first, the shape of the coming alignment was clear to neither continental protagonist. British withdrawal from the wartime alliance was gradual and erratic, more so than that of the United States. Also, German defiance angered Lloyd George at first, leading to harsh words and some partial French victories. Many important early conferences, especially those with German representation, took place in London, and so it fell to Lloyd George as chairman to deliver decisions to the disappointed Germans who at first were unaware on how hard-fought the battles had been and how many concessions the French usually had made. As the British became more conciliatory toward the Germans, they went through a phase, chiefly regarding disarmament, of agreeing to sharply worded missives and then resisting enforcement action.[15] By mid-1921, the Germans understood the situation,

12. CID minutes and memoranda, 1921–22, CAB 2/3, 3/3, 4/7, 5/4, PRO, passim; Sarraut to Briand, n.d. (recd 16, 22 Dec. 1921), tels. 1192–9, 1247–50, FMAE, sous-série B, file 76 [hereafter B/76].
13. Sources cited in fn. 12; additionally, Jaffe, *Decision*, 219; T. Jones, *Whitehall Diary*, 195. In addition to the ample evidence in FMAE B/75–76, see also Joel Blatt, "The Parity that Meant Superiority: French Naval Policy toward Italy at the Washington Conference, 1921–22, and Interwar French Foreign Policy," *French Historical Studies* 12:2 (Fall 1981): 223–48.
14. For a recent example, see Frank Costigliola, *Awkward Dominion* (Ithaca, 1985).
15. Random examples include Great Britain, Foreign Office, *Documents on British Foreign Policy, 1919–1939* (London, 1958–), 1st ser. [hereafter *DBFP*: all references to First Series unless otherwise noted], 8:471–81; ICP 150, 156, 24, 29 Jan. 1921, CAB 29/90 [PRO]; *Das Kabinett Cuno*, 32.

but the French had not faced it.[16] In part they were hoping against hope; in part the British had given them a few straws to clutch.

The entry into force of the Versailles treaty in January 1920 coincided with Alexandre Millerand's advent as French premier and foreign minister. Of French leaders in the 1920s, he was the most determined to enforce the treaty, and not merely because he was the first, when the prospects of doing so seemed more realistic. He remained adamant throughout his presidency. It was clear from the outset that the continuing war would be fought on the twin battlefields of reparations and disarmament. Millerand tackled both with energy, determined to defend France's treaty rights where they mattered most to French security.

The first crisis of the Entente occurred in March 1920 when, after the Kapp Putsch in Berlin, the so-called Red Revolution in the Ruhr gave Germany occasion to seek permission to send troops to that part of the demilitarized zone. Reports of events in the Ruhr were confused, and the French, aware that a deadline for further German disarmament was nearing, were wary of giving Germany an excuse not to honour it. As the Allies could not agree and thus did not reply to the German request, Berlin sent troops to the Ruhr without permission.[17] France retaliated with a unilateral occupation of Frankfurt, in which she was supported only by Belgium — for extraneous reasons.[18]

Whether France's action was wise proved irrelevant. In the eyes of the world and especially British opinion, Millerand had doubly blotted France's copybook. First, the hasty expedition included Moroccan troops whose presence in Frankfurt, despite exemplary behaviour, was deemed a provocation by Germans and most of the western world. France learned a lesson and promised never again to send nonwhite troops beyond the Rhineland, where their presence was appreciated by the Rhenish but decried by the rest of Germany, Scandinavia, and the English-speaking world.[19] Also, Millerand had violated a pledge to the British not to act unilaterally.[20] He was chastized at the San Remo conference, and at Spa in July had to settle, despite France's need for coking coal, for reduced German quotas and payment of an Allied premium for each ton in order to supplement the diet of the miners, which the German government in fact used to reimburse balances owed to Britain.[21]

---

16. *Die Kabinette Wirth*, 1:238, 285.
17. See *DBFP* 10:184–5ff.; FO 371/3780 passim; Belgium, Académie Royale de Belgique, *Documents diplomatiques belges, 1920–1940*, 5 vols. (Brussels, 1964–6) [hereafter *DDB*], 1:126ff.
18. The Belgian concern was the Guillaume-Luxembourg railway, about which France made apparent (but not genuine) concessions in return for a Belgian battalion at Frankfurt.
19. On the question of indigenous troops, see Sally Marks, "Black Watch on the Rhine," *European Studies Review* 13:3 (July 1983): 297–333.
20. *DDB*, 1:159, 217–8; *DBFP*, 9:283–4.
21. Reparation Commission, *Official Documents*, 23 vols. (London, 1922–30), 5, part 1:98–9; Leygues to Dubois, 20 Nov. 1920, Laurent to Leygues, 20 Nov. 1920, tel., et seq., Papers of Alexandre Millerand, file 16, FMAE.

Through this first year the treaty was in force, German failure to honour it was a leading topic of Entente debate. It was soon evident that the only effective means of enforcement was a Ruhr occupation. This was discussed as early as March 1920 and seriously entertained at Spa. On this occasion, Lloyd George agreed to it but characteristically attached a variety of concessions rendering it improbable.[22] In fact, the rest of the year was consumed in an arid squabble about the next move in the reparations struggle.[23] Thus, Millerand did not have to face the major battles on the terrain most crucial to French economic and financial security, that of reparations. Those fell to Aristide Briand.

Briand started with two apparent victories, which proved to be of little value and which did not satisfy a French opinion fearful that he was conceding too much in substantive matters.[24] At the January 1921 Paris Conference, the Allies agreed that the five-ten-fifteen year terms for the Rhineland occupation would not start to run until Germany began to fulfill the treaty.[25] Though France clung to this decision, the British promptly chose to forget it, so it became a dead letter.[26] Then, in March at London, the Allies, in response to German defaults on reparations, disarmament, and war criminals, plus an inadequate reparations offer, occupied Düsseldorf, seized Rhenish customs posts, and imposed a large levy on German exports.[27] Even before Germany accepted the reparations settlement in May under threat of a Ruhr occupation, Britain assured German leaders that she favoured immediate cancellation, without awaiting German fulfillment, of all sanctions save the export levy, which had been Lloyd George's wish.[28] The customs cordon was soon withdrawn, the occupation of Düsseldorf (which eventually merged with the

22. *DDB*, 1:126–9; *DBFP*, 8:603–6; FO 371/3781–2 passim.
23. The negotiations towards the abortive Geneva conference can most easily be traced in FO 371/4727–9.
24. De Gaiffier to Jaspar, 1 Feb. and 16 March 1921, nos. 946/486, 2584/1253, BMAE CP FR/1921.
25. ICP 157, 29 Jan. 1921, CAB 29/90.
26. During the London Conference of July–August 1924, Herriot conceded the point.
27. ICP 172, 3 March 1921, ICP 178, 179, 7 March 1921, CAB 29/91.
28. Edgar Vincent, Viscount D'Abernon, *An Ambassador of Peace: Lord D'Abernon's Diary*, 3 vols. (London, 1929), 1:12, 174; Cab. 36 (21), 10 May 1921, CAB 23/25; *DBFP*, 16:664–6.

Ruhr occupation and lasted until 1925) became only a pinprick, and the British unilaterally collected the export levy to their considerable profit.[29]

The reparations settlement reached in London in May 1921 was also much less than it seemed, even before Germany failed to execute it. Briand lost the first round. In view of his increasingly restive domestic opinion, he wished to occupy the Ruhr on the basis of German default on interim payments under the treaty, but Lloyd George's insistence on not moving unless Germany rejected the new settlement prevailed.[30] The London Schedule of Payments, an arduously achieved compromise, effectively reduced the Reparation Commission's figure for total liability of 132 milliard gold marks, itself less than France wanted, to fifty milliard marks, of which France would receive 52 per cent or twenty-six milliard. An elaborate bond scheme consigned the remainder to never-never land, designed only to mislead continental opinion and, if possible, to provide a disguised form of Allied debt cancellation.[31] As Germany accepted the ultimatum, the threatened Ruhr occupation did not materialize.

Germany paid the first milliard, due in the summer of 1921. Thereafter, defaults recurred on a rising scale and Germany soon sought a moratorium.[32] Thus, by late 1921 the reparations crisis had become acute and remained so for three years. By then, Briand had had another apparent success which proved futile. In an effort to solve the reparations tangle, France had negotiated the Wiesbaden Agreement with Germany to substitute shipment of reconstruction goods for reparations cash. But some industrialists of both countries objected, Germany had second thoughts after failing to retain all of Upper Silesia, and Britain protested a de facto French priority and signs of Franco-German economic entente. Thus, the Wiesbaden Agreement never went into effect. It served only to exacerbate Anglo-French relations and to weaken Briand politically.[33]

---

29. Briand to Tirard, 28 Sept. 1921, tel. 171, FMAE B/45; État-Major, French Army of the Rhine (Mainz) to FMAE, 25 Aug. 1925, tel. 3420, FMAE B/156. After Germany accepted the London Schedule of Payments on 11 May 1921, Britain lowered her 50 per cent levy to the 26 per cent specified therein. ICP 208, 13 Aug. 1921, CAB 29/32; Seydoux to Briand, 28 July 1921, FMAE, série Z, Allemagne, file 234 [hereafter Z/Alle/234]. The British levy continued until a new arrangement replaced it in April 1925. *Bulletin d'information économique*, 11, 18 Apr. 1925, nos. 43, 44, Archives Nationales, Paris [hereafter AN], $F^{12}/9203$. France imposed the 26 per cent levy as of 1 October 1924. Herriot to Hoesch, 20 Sept. 1924, FMAE B/55. British proceeds to 20 January 1930 amounted to 372,625,525 gold marks. United States, Department of State, *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States: The Paris Peace Conference, 1919*, 13 vols. (Washington, 1942–47), 13:532.

30. De Gaiffier to Jaspar, 23 Apr. 1921, no. 3920/1908, BMAE CP FR/1921; ICP 190, 191, 30 Apr. 1921, ICP 193, 1 May 1921, CAB 29/92.

31. On the London Schedule, see Sally Marks, "Reparations Reconsidered: a Reminder," *Central European History* 2:4 (Dec. 1969): 356–65.

32. Reparation Commission, 1:15, 28; 4:12, 19, 22–3 FMAE note, 30 Nov. 1921, FMAE Z/Alle/468.

33. On the Wiesbaden agreement, see Millerand/18 passim.

By the end of 1921, the British were declining to act against German disarmament defaults and Lloyd George was embarking on his scheme for European reconstruction, whereas Briand was struggling to preserve a substantial slice of the increasingly ephemeral reparations pie for France and pursuing a British alliance. How much he would have conceded to gain the latter remains uncertain, but the British clearly viewed it as a prelude to a German alliance of the Locarno format, with Britain balancing between. In any event, pressures from Millerand, Louis Barthou and others on the French right, and a press corps charging that Briand was conceding too much led to Briand's resignation before the Cannes Conference had settled anything except Lloyd George's economic conference at Genoa.[34]

Raymond Poincaré, who succeeded him, wanted the British alliance but in more concrete terms than Britain would accept, so it fell by the wayside.[35] He did not want the Genoa Conference, judging Lloyd George's schemes to be unrealistic and a threat to France's position.[36] After its failure, the unresolved reparations problem returned to the fore. Partial moratoria papered over the gap until the end of 1922, but what then? The Allies could not agree, either before or after the fall of Lloyd George. Andrew Bonar Law awaited events passively.

Poincaré did not, though he was equally adverse to making decisions. Under intense pressure to take firm action from Millerand and André Maginot, he reluctantly prepared for a Ruhr occupation, deciding as little as possible and hoping he would not have to act or, if he did, that Britain would be with him, despite indications to the contrary.[37] His last hope of escape from the dilemma created by his pose as a strong man and his long-standing calls for forceful action was closed by the British reparations plan. It probably would have meant the end of reparations and certainly would have given Britain control of any that remained. No continental premier could accept such a politically catastrophic plan, and none did.[38] Thus France and Belgium, with token Italian support, entered the Ruhr, initially to collect the coal shipments on which Germany was in default.

---

34. On the pact proposal, see Sally Marks, "Ménage à Trois," *International History Review* 4:4 (November 1982): 524–52.
35. Ibid.
36. On all aspects of the Genoa Conference, see Carole Fink, *The Genoa Conference: European Diplomacy, 1921–1922* (Chapel Hill, 1984).
37. Saint-Aulaire to Poincaré, 24 Dec. 1922, tel. 1171–7, FMAE B/140; de Gaiffier to Jaspar, 23 and 27 Dec. 1922, nos. 16670/7709, 16755/7756, BMAE CP FR/1922; de Gaiffier to Jaspar, 6 Jan. 1923, no. 209/98, BMAE CP FR/1923.
38. United Kingdom. Parliament. *Inter-allied Conferences on Reparations and Inter-allied Debts Held in London and Paris, December 1922 and January 1923*. Cmd. 1812. 1923, contains the British plan (112–9) and the minutes of both conferences.

France and Belgium sorely needed the coal, and soon both were banking down blast furnaces for lack of it,[39] but Poincaré, who did not expect much financial return from the Ruhr venture, saw that more was involved. Though frightened at what he was doing and astonished at German resistance, he knew that the treaty was at stake along with France's far-from-unilateral victory in the war and her power position in Europe. He understood that in entering the Ruhr, France had played her last trump and must win on this card or go down to defeat at the hands of a potentially greater foe. Thus he clung grimly to the decisions he had so reluctantly made and took as few others as possible, hoping against reality that Germany would submit or that Britain would enter the fray at France's side.[40] Instead, Germany escalated passive resistance whereas Britain stood aside in disapproval, watching the continental protagonists locked in combat.

The Ruhr struggle was the climax, if not the conclusion, of the continuation of war by other means, but, considering how much was at stake, it had its half-hearted aspects. Poincaré enunciated his policy as "slowly and softly," resisting Belgian pressure to proceed "hard and fast" in order to settle matters quickly.[41] His initially limited operations escalated only in response to German resistance, and reluctantly at that. At no point did Poincaré contemplate brutal measures which would have guaranteed quick victory; throughout, the German government was able to ship food and money unimpeded into the Ruhr and Rhineland to sustain the resistance. Yet French policy was condemned as inhumane throughout the western world with no comparisons made to German practices in the Great War. From the outset, Britain and Germany won this particular propaganda battle, largely by default, as Poincaré's government did little to counter the blasts they were receiving from world opinion.

Poincaré won the Ruhr campaign, forcing Germany to end passive resistance, but he soon lost the war. Timidity, procrastination, legalism, and reluctance to make difficult decisions and to further damage relations with Britain, together with conflicting domestic pressures, not least from the Comité des Forges and the Comité des Houillères, contributed to his failure to seize the initiative when France had the upper hand.[42] Further, he was distracted into an unconsidered panicky

39. Logan to Strong, 23 Feb. and 9 March 1923, files 2/287, 328, Papers of Col. James A. Logan, Jr., Hoover Institution, Stanford, Ca.; Nollet to Poincaré, 6 March 1923, no. 2535, FMAE B/186; de Gaiffier to Jaspar, 27 Feb. 1923, no. 2852/1381, BMAE B/10.071.

40. FMAE B/141–3, Millerand/25, passim; de Gaiffier to Jaspar, 26 Jan. 1923, pers., BMAE B/10.071 de Gaiffier to Jaspar, 27 Jan. and 7 Apr. 1023, nos. 1382/708, 4716/2194, BMAE CP FR/1923.

41. Herbette to Poincaré, 18 Jan. 1923, tel. 33, AJ^5/342, AN; Herbette to Poincaré, 8 Feb. 1923, tel. 104–5, FMAE B/145; quotations from de Gaiffier to Jaspar, 24 Jan. 1923, no. 1195/611, BMAE CP FR/1923 and Rolin-Jaequemyns to Jaspar, 2 March 1923, pers., BMAE B/10.071.

42. See the following FMAE files, passim: Millerand/31–3, Z/Ruhr/31–35, B/157, 220–1. Also de Gaiffier to Jaspar, 18 Feb. 1924, no. 2210/989, BMAE FR/1924.

plunge into Rhenish separatism when he suddenly faced an unanticipated outbreak by separatists unconnected to France in the Belgian zone. This profitless policy gained only further condemnation from France's allies and world opinion.[43]

In the end, however, France's victory in the Ruhr was destroyed by her allies in conjunction with her foe. Britain, America, and Germany, with assistance from Belgium and Italy, both weary of combat, combined to undo what France had accomplished. The upshot was the Dawes Committee, ostensibly to investigate Germany's capacity to pay but actually to extract France from the Ruhr and to find a new basis for reparations. As it began its labours, France slid into acute financial crisis arising from years of slipshod practices and too much reliance on dwindling German payments. The effect was to weaken France severely, both in immediate negotiations and in coming battles to preserve her treaty rights and what remained of her Ruhr victory.[44]

All countries concerned accepted the Dawes Plan reluctantly for lack of an alternative. It effectively scaled down reparations, both annual payments and the total sum, called for a loan to revive the German economy, specified an end to the economic occupation of the Ruhr without addressing the military occupation, and ensured that Germany's tax burden, contrary to the treaty, would remain below that of victor countries.[45] The British, again mesmerized by the short term, thought it impossibly severe.[46] Before the battle over its implementation began, Poincaré was gone, defeated chiefly by tax increases arising from the financial crisis. Millerand was driven from office as well, and the coming struggle was entrusted to Edouard Herriot.

He approached his task in optimism, naiveté, and utter disorganization, and was an easy victim for the wily Gustav Stresemann and the underrated Ramsay MacDonald, who effectively ganged up on him, but the chief architects of Herriot's defeat were the American bankers. As they were to provide both the Dawes loan to Germany and also the emergency loans France needed, they dictated the terms and were concerned chiefly with maximum security for their money. When the long 1924 London Conference was over, France had lost the Ruhr occupation and its growing financial receipts, her commanding position in a powerful Reparation

---

43. See FMAE Z/Rive gauche du Rhin/31–41 [hereafter Z/RGR/] and also AJ^{9}/3777–81, 3790–98, 3804–5, AN. Poincaré held the separatist leader, Hans-Adam Dorten, in utter contempt but did not dare to discontinue his subsidy because Dorten enjoyed considerable support in the National Assembly among the parties of the right necessary to Poincaré's majority. A separatist eruption in the Belgian zone, where France could neither dictate to nor influence the rebels, was the one possibility he had not contemplated.

44. On the negotiations to establish the Dawes Committee and also the financial crisis, see Stephen A. Schuker, *The End of French Predominance in Europe* (Chapel Hill, 1976).

45. Text in Reparation Commission, 14. The text called for commensurate taxation but the mechanisms, at British insistence, insured that this would not happen.

46. Niemeyer memo, 14 Apr. 1924, FO 371/9740.

Commission, the concept that the Rhineland terms had not begun to run, real prospect of substantial reparations in the future or any sanction against default, and the last hope of a trade treaty with Germany before the latter was free to dictate the terms.[47] The power balance had shifted appreciably in Germany's favour.

All Herriot salvaged from his travail was a promise from MacDonald to inspect the German military prior to evacuation of the Cologne zone, scheduled for 10 January 1925. Accordingly, since reparations had been settled temporarily, the continuing diplomatic fray shifted to the secondary terrain of disarmament. Stresemann fought a series of delaying engagements, but MacDonald honoured his promise and the inspection occurred despite German obstruction. As it became clear that the report would be unfavourable, Stresemann faced the problem of extracting the Allies from Cologne despite a negative report and with as little further disarmament as possible. He also wished to enter the League of Nations on his own terms, and to be well paid for doing so, and he needed to fend off a proposed Anglo-French-Belgian alliance which the new foreign secretary, Austen Chamberlain, was seriously contemplating. His solution, inspired by the British ambassador, Lord D'Abernon, who operated outside his instructions, was the scheme which eventuated in the Locarno treaties.[48] This would not only solve Stresemann's immediate problems but also restore Germany to formal equality and diplomatic respectability while affording compensation for honouring treaty clauses Germany was in no position to overturn.

The reciprocal Locarno arrangement guaranteed by Britain, putting Germany on the same footing with France, was exactly what the French did not want. However, the Quai d'Orsay under Herriot and then Briand (who replaced him in April 1925) concluded after Britain rejected the Geneva Protocol in March that it must be accepted nevertheless because rejection would end the last hope of a British guarantee in any form. Fear for France's security was decisive despite the humiliation implied in the arrangement, and France decided early on to pay whatever price was necessary in terms of her Eastern allies to gain the all-important British guarantee.[49]

It is arguable whether the documents initialled that euphoric October night at Locarno gave Europe — or France — even a false sense of security, for both the arrangement itself and the much-heralded spirit of Locarno lacked solidity. The

47. On the London conference, Schuker is definitive. See also Jacques Bariéty, *Les Relations franco-allemandes après la première guerre mondiale* (Paris, 1977), part 4.

48. F.G. Stambrook, "'*Das Kind*' — Lord D'Abernon and the Origins of the Locarno Pact," *Central European History* 1 (1968): 233–63; FO memo, 27 Aug. 1924, FO 371/9819; FO memo, 22 Jan. 1925, FO 371/10707; FO memo, 29 Nov. 24, Cavan memo, 3 Dec. 1924, FO 371/9833; D'Abernon to Chamberlain, 20 Jan. 1925, FO 371/10726.

49. FMAE memo, 26 Feb. 1925, FMAE draft instructions, 12 March 1925, FMAE Z/Grande-Bretagne, file 73 [hereafter Z/GB/73]; de Gaiffier to Hymans, 20 March 1925, no. 3417/1621, de Gaiffier to Ruzette, 12 June 1925, no. 6737/3073, BMAE CP FR/1925.

tone of diplomatic discourse and international oratory improved, but the old fears and hostilities remained. The victors of Locarno were Britain and Germany. Britain had formally returned to the fulcrum of the power balance but did not see that the balance was continuing to tip. Stresemann had gained all that he intended at minimal cost, since Germany did not have the military might to cross a western frontier or enter the demilitarized zone in meaningful numbers, and he had made no formal commitment about eastern frontiers. The intent of the Locarno pact was to freeze the western frontier in perpetuity, but there was a certain German-induced ambiguity in the text. Thus, a few days after the ceremony at Locarno, Stresemann tried to repurchase Eupen-Malmédy from Belgium,[50] and he soon assured Germans that the treaties did not rule out regaining Alsace-Lorraine in the future.[51] Briand let this pass without open challenge so as not to jeopardize German ratification, but he knew that France was among the losers of Locarno. His argument in defending the treaties to the Chamber was that Germany had promised not to attack France.[52] Whether he thought this had been promised in good faith is doubtful.

Briand knew Locarno had tipped the power balance further in Germany's favour. Continuing financial crisis, British policy, the weak hand inherited from Herriot, and his own dedication to a British guarantee at any price had narrowed his options. The dearly bought guarantee was militarily inoperable, for the British refused to make military arrangements with either party.[53] Further, almost any French action to enforce the treaty might bring Britain to Germany's side, and the League's faint enforcement powers had been destroyed by reinterpreting Article 16 regarding sanctions into nothingness.[54] Germany was restored to equality and was about to enter the League as the disarmament issue dissolved into oratory and Cologne was evacuated. Yet France still did not have an economic treaty with Germany to ensure coal supplies and a market for Lorraine ores and semifinished products.[55] With reparations scant and their future uncertain, France was reluctantly entering into debt settlements with Britain and America. In short, aside from the demilitarized zone and a Rhineland occupation diminishing in size and value, what mattered most to France in the treaty was gone, and still she did not have financial, economic, or military security. France, no longer genuinely a great power, could not enforce the treaty against British opposition. She had lost the continuing war, and Briand seems to have known it.

He reacted in diverse ways, continuing to direct foreign policy when financial crisis returned Poincaré to the helm. Desperation led them to attempt a deal with Stresemann, who was trying to buy his way out of much of what remained of the

50. *DDB*, 2:400.
51. Manfred J. Enssle, *Stresemann's Territorial Revisionism* (Wiesbaden, 1980), 110–7.
52. Briand speech to Chambre, 15 Dec. 1925, FMAE Z/GB/88.
53. *DBFP*, Series 1A, 1:249–51.
54. For the texte de bateau, effectively implying that each member of the League of Nations could decide for itself whether to participate in sanctions, either military or economic, see *DDB*, 2:345–6.
55. A Franco-German trade treaty, largely on German terms, was signed in August 1927.

treaty. The meeting at Thoiry, just after Germany entered the League in September 1926, added to the illusion of peace but the arrangement discussed there soon collapsed of its own improbability and Anglo-Belgian protest.[56] The French franc was restored by orthodox measures. Thereafter, Briand conceded as little as possible as slowly as possible, while France signalled her true concern by launching construction of the Maginot Line. Because Chamberlain did indeed "love France like a woman"[57] and saw Briand as her finest son, French footdragging had some success. Thus the fruits of Locarno did not ripen rapidly enough to satisfy Stresemann,[58] but ripen they did.

Briand tried a variety of ploys, including the Kellogg-Briand Pact, originally intended to draw the United States back into Europe at France's side. By the time it was signed in Paris in August 1928, the pressures were mounting as calls came from across the British political spectrum, from Stresemann, and from the American Agent-General for Reparations for an early Rhineland evacuation, a new reparations plan, or both. Much scarred by past financial crises and aware that the Rhineland occupation was losing diplomatic value as it progressed, Poincaré and Briand decided to trade early evacuation for a final, cast-iron reparations settlement assuring France's finances and a Rhenish inspection scheme to buttress her security. They failed, defeated once again by an Anglo-German combination with tacit American support. The inspection scheme became meaningless and the Rhineland was to be evacuated on 30 June 1930, in return for which German reparations annuities were again to be reduced, especially in the early years of the new scheme.[59] The "final" Young Plan in fact lasted about a year and a half.

Briand's response to yet another defeat for France was his call for European economic union, issued at Geneva six days after the key Young Plan documents were initialled at the Hague. His scheme, which proved not economic but political,[60] was a desperate attempt to freeze the status quo. Whatever prospects it might have had were destroyed by Hitler's electoral success in September 1930, a triumph of German nationalism released from the bonds of the Rhineland occupation. This accelerated central Europe's plunge into depression and generated a new round of treaty revision to Germany's benefit. Briand was soon gone, but

56. Georges Suarez, *Briand: sa vie, son oeuvre*, 6 vols. (Paris, 1938–52), 6:219–27; Gustav Stresemann, *Vermächtnis*, 3 vols. (Berlin, 1932–3), 3:17–23; Jacques Bariéty, "Le Projet de rétrocession d'Eupen-Malmédy par la Belgique à l'Allemagne," *Actes du Colloque de Metz: Les Relations franco-belges de 1830 à 1934* (Metz, 1975), 346. Stresemann's records of the Thoiry talks may be found in Germany, Auswärtiges Amt: Akten, Selected German Foreign Ministry records microfilmed for the British Foreign Office and the US State Department, T-120, roll 3146.

57. Sir Charles Petrie, *The Life and Letters of the Right Honourable Sir Austen Chamberlain*, 2 vols. (London, 1940), 2:304.

58. Jon Jacobson, *Locarno Diplomacy* (Princeton, 1972), 145–8.

59. *DDB*, 2:536–60. For Young Plan texts, see Denys P. Myers, *The Reparations Settlement* (Boston, 1929 [1930]). See also David Carlton, *MacDonald versus Henderson* (New York, 1970), ch. 2.

60. For text, see *DBFP*, 2nd ser., 1:314–24.

lesser successors, coping with depression, political unrest, a divided opinion, and mounting fear of Germany, were no more able than he to summon the courage, will, and honesty to tell the truth and face France's defeat.

Perhaps that defeat had occurred by 1918. Certainly France did not win World War I, and the victory was pyrrhic at best. Though events obscured the basic fact for several years, France's great-power status was irretrievably lost, as she became increasingly dependent on the mercy of her English-speaking allies, who were progressively less merciful.

What should France have done? Facing facts is always best but never easy. To suggest that France should have recognized in 1918 that she was a defeated power whereas Germany was not, while triumphant armies paraded the Champs Elysées, boggles the imagination. At the peace conference, there were occasional lapses of French realism and enough encounters with an Anglo-American stone wall to give pause, if anybody had had time to pause. American withdrawal was not certain, however, and no French leader could assume that the British in general and Lloyd George in particular (who had such a large voice in shaping the treaty) had so many mental reservations and would turn so decisively against it.

Thereafter the French made a good many mistakes. Until the late twenties, when they were in retreat, they handled world opinion ineptly at best. French troops in the Rhineland were often tactless and swaggering, though rarely brutal. French generals, whose ambitions were often more grandiose than those of the government, occasionally acted on their own, as in the Rhineland in 1919 and in the Palatinate in 1923.[61] Yet except for the occasional fait accompli, they did not dictate policy. Poincaré was undoubtedly too legalistic, too acerbic, too timid, and too reluctant to take decisions, not the commander to wage a decisive battle. Briand was perhaps too flexible and too inclined to obscure the situation in a cloud of rhetoric. Neither found a satisfactory solution to the basic dilemma.

The problem was that France alone was too weak to enforce the treaty against a fundamentally stronger Germany. Yet it was all she had, so she tried to do so, praying for diplomatic support. As France read the power equation correctly, she knew that she lacked the might to do the job unilaterally. Alliance with Soviet Russia to restore the balance was politically impossible in the early twenties before Germany took the initiative at Rapallo. So was accepting defeat. Thus France counted on her western allies. They chose, from inertia, other concerns, and misreading the power balance, to build Germany up at France's expense and viewed France as imperialist, aggressive, and unreasonable, recognizing France's security concerns only as a neurosis to be granted the palliative of meaningless paper to balance substantive concessions to Germany.[62] In time, France acquired a degree of realism about American withdrawal but could not bring herself to accept Britain's defection.

61. Clemenceau to Mangin, 31 May 1919, Vin/6N/73; Laroche note, 20 Nov. 1923, FMAE Z/RGR/36; Poincaré to Tirard, 28 Jan. 1924, tel. 122, FMAE Z/RGR/40.
62. T. Jones, *Whitehall Diary*, 178; Hankey memo, 31 Dec. 1920, Hankey Papers 1/5.

What if she had? What then could she do? It is easy to condemn French policy or to damn the Versailles treaty. In fact, the treaty was not exceptionally harsh, given a long and bitter war; it left German power substantially intact — indeed that was part of the problem — and was merciful compared to German plans for victory. Nevertheless it eroded quickly, a fact which the French did not fully foresee and were slow to accept. When they faced the problem, there was no solution, for the sad reality was that by the time the treaty was completed, the only terms the Germans were prepared genuinely to accept amounted to a reversion to the status quo ante bellum, for defeat had never been brought home to them and they had lost sight of it. The treaty was based on a military verdict which Germany soon forgot, thanks in part to Allied failure to remind them in late 1918 and in 1919, and Anglo-American reluctance thereafter. Soon Britain and America were prepared to grant Germany, as the easiest solution, a disguised but fairly rapid reversion to the status quo ante bellum in the matters of greatest concern to France — and Germany — without full recognition that this amounted to reversing the military verdict. As the French understandably resisted, they became the obstacle to washing one's hands of the problem, and thus were viewed as unreasonable, aggressive, vengeful, and imperialist. This they were not, but the policies of the other three great powers rendered that of France futile and made her leaders a trifle frantic. Self-evidently, no French government could tear up the fraying treaty and admit that it had lost the war, but at the outset France may have contributed to her own decline, for perhaps defeat had come at the moment of apparent triumph. Marshal Foch agreed to the misnamed and fatefully moderate armistice from the highest of motives, but possibly France's eclipse was sealed in his railway car in the forest of Compiègne, leaving her not the grandeur but only the misery of victory.